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1859



ORATION

BY THE LATE

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COL. WILLIAM A. JACKSON.





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PRESENTED TO THE FRIENDS

OF

COLONEL JACKSON,

AS A SOUVENIR OF HIM.

AN ORATION,

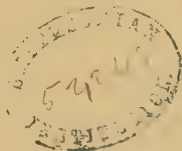
DELIVERED AT WINDHAM CENTRE, GREENE COUNTY, N.Y.,

JULY 4, 1859,

BY THE LATE

COL. WILLIAM A. JACKSON,

OF THE EIGHTEENTH REGIMENT OF NEW-YORK VOLUNTEERS.



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ORATION.

It has been said, Fellow-citizens, that as a nation, we have no history. But when I read of the enterprize, the courage, the determination which peculiarly characterize the colonization of our land ; and when to-day, in looking about me, I perceive the wonderful results that have been accomplished since the Saxon arm began the conflict with primeval nature on our own shores, I am persuaded that no other chapter in the history of the world presents so splendid a phase of human development.

Our history does not offer the reader the eventful succession of a long and brilliant monarchy : it has no feudal and chivalric period, no grand armada, no Waterloo ; but it records the patient endurance, the heroic suffering, the God-given energy and will which have upreared a mighty empire. It records the story of a revolution, which marked a new era in the progress of the race ; it writes, on the page of heroes, the names of thousands whose brave hearts beat for humanity.

The contemplation of these facts in our history should give us great pride. From these we can learn what it is to be American citizens in the full and proper sense. They offer us example and advice. Let us ask ourselves what is American citizenship ; what the position, the duties, the rewards. To be a citizen of this free land implies sovereignty ; not domination over a crushed people, not the unbridled license of one against the fettered liberties of all others, but the sovereignty over self, the freedom of untrammelled utterance, the privilege of a voice in the creation of the laws which govern.

The political condition of the American citizen is anomalous, in the present condition of the world. The causes that make it thus are written in our revolution, in our constitution, in our political system. And because it is anomalous, because the American citizen is the sole representative of the principle of self-government, because to his care history has bequeathed the priceless ideas asserted and established by patriots at Athens and at Rome, because from buried ages comes the warning voice of the Forum and the Capitol, because humanity sends from the old world its wail of lamentation, should each citizen feel himself the exponent

of the system under which he lives, and so act by voice and vote as to strengthen its power for good. The position of the American citizen, then, is one of great responsibility. A Providence in history has made him a prominent figure in the world's drama. He is looked upon and envied, because he is free. He possesses every right which man can ask. It is not then merely his pleasure to enjoy his freedom and his rights, but his duty to prove them worthy of enjoyment by strengthening and defending them, by preserving their purity, and thus giving them a voice of moral strength which shall speak like the voice of prophecy to the nations of the earth.

Oh the responsibility of freedom ! Do the men of America feel it ? Do they properly remember, on this our Nation's great festival, the occasion and the means that gave it birth ? Do they remember that they possess their liberty in trust ? Do they remember that they should render it with increase to their children ? Do they bear in mind that the magnitude of a blessing is a measure of responsibility ? Let every man write over his hearthstone, "Where much is given, much will be required."

The sovereignty and responsibility of American citizenship involve the performance of many duties. In what spirit do we perform them? Is it with the purity of sentiment and the dignity of action which their importance requires? I leave the answer to the conscience of each citizen.

When the voice from Faneuil Hall evoked from the bosom of the times the effort for liberty, and, like the gushing waters which followed the rod of Israel's leader, it poured itself upon the land; when the fathers, after solemn prayer, made that declaration which is as immortal as the principle which it asserts; when the men of the Revolution had driven from the desecrated homes and ravaged shores of the colonies the mercenary instruments of British tyranny, and when the olive branch once more blossomed, and the Federal Union, supplanting the alliance of the colonies, had given our flag a national character, the duties of the American citizen received their inauguration, the orbit of their performance was designated. The work had begun. The weary warriors of the Revolution, the statesmen who had directed and sustained their efforts, were approaching the hour appointed for all. To their children they be-

queathed their swords and their principles : to their children they bequeathed the liberty they had gained, secured by an entail which reckless folly alone can break. In their wisdom and in their great love for that liberty, they placed the responsibility for its preservation upon each citizen. Upon each citizen that responsibility remains : its binding force grows stronger with time. Each year develops the resources of our continent ; each day adds to the number of our people, and each moment records our national sins for their final punishment. Every man knows that the wisdom of our ancestors placed in our hands the means of redressing political wrongs. It is a privilege to be exercised with care, but fearlessly. It is a weapon against wrong, only while its purity is preserved. It is a trenchant blade whose polish and edge are so brilliant and keen, that while in honest hands it will hew down the mightiest iniquity, it will tarnish and grow dull if it be wielded in the service of corruption.

This privilege is the Elective Franchise, the proper exercise of which is the first political duty of the citizen. That it has been shamefully abused, has been made time and again to sub-

serve dishonest purposes, has been employed to subvert the constitutional sovereignty of the people, has been in some localities so degraded that men of pure and honest sentiment have pronounced it a failure, is, alas, too true. But the fact that this abuse exists, furnishes the strongest motive for those who love their country to rally to its rescue. There are honest men who do not vote, because the ballot-box has been corrupted. Are they guiltless? Do they not, by refusing to exercise a right, commit a great wrong, as well as those who pervert it to dishonest purposes?

My Countrymen, the destinies of this nation are in the ballot-box. He who does not vote, and he who votes corruptly, are alike guilty. Let those who lament the misuse of the elective franchise, yet do not attempt to preserve its standard, remember that it furnishes its own correction. The people are honest, and it has ever been found that the corrupt are a minority. Never has there been a period in our history, when it was more essential for the people to vindicate their honesty, than at the present. A disposition has been manifested to sully the purity of our dearest rights. The unclean hand

of corruption has reared an altar for its worshippers in the temple of our liberties; the venders of political wares have made its holiest sanctuary their market-place. Let the people drive out the money-changers; drive them out by the force of honest votes; drive them out, by performing the duties of citizens. Thus shall the glorious covenant with freedom, ratified by our fathers, not be broken. Shrink not from the duty of the elective franchise, if you would preserve, in their primal strength and beauty, the cardinal principles of our system. But if citizens allow business or pleasure to absorb the single hour their country asks them to give to her service; if they bewail corruption, without arresting its progress, they need utter no complaint if it blasts the purity and truth of the people, and renders our national character a byword and a reproach; a lie against freedom, a libel upon humanity.

The neglect of this primal duty has led, in various portions of our land, to confusion and anarchy. Because honest citizens have neglected to perform their duties, political corruption has accomplished the vilest purposes; and so powerful in their misuse of the ballot-box had the miscreants who corrupted its purity become,

that revolution was the only means by which they could be ousted from their usurpation. But it is a dangerous experiment. Our system contains its own correction, if the citizen will apply it in time. Vigilance committees were never contemplated by the Constitution ; but every citizen is exhorted, by the spirit of that instrument, to exercise that true vigilance which will destroy an evil before it can mature, and guard our liberty against the insidious wiles of the serpents it has nourished by its warmth.

There are other duties of action and of speech, whose proper fulfilment should ever be operative upon the American citizen ; but they are all intimately connected with his duties at the ballot-box. They must be manfully performed, to render us the efficient champions of the liberties we enjoy.

The future contains the elements of disorganization. There is to be a terrible reckoning in the old world, between the people and their rulers. Liberty and despotism are preparing for their final conflict, and Liberty looks through the gloom to us for a ray of hope to cheer her in the battle.

Upon the plains of Italy, the battle-smoke wreathes upwards from the initial conflicts of a

struggle, which, to my mind, presages the final liberty of Europe; but it will be an ordeal of fire and blood. The conservative influences which have, for selfish purposes, evoked the demon of war, have also aroused a spirit in the people which cannot be propitiated or allayed.

Are we to remain silent spectators of the scene? Time alone will disclose our part. But in view of our position as a nation, representing that principle of government for which the earnest souls of Europe pant as “the hart for the water-brooks;” in view of the fact, written unmistakably in history, that Providence has assigned to us the solution of the great problem of our race, the capacity of man for self-government, it behoves us to preserve from taint our institutions, and to make our nationality so conspicuous in all true and manly requisites, that it may be a beacon whose rays shall ever shine with an undimmed and certain lustre.

And is the future without its dangers to ourselves? Is our isolated position to protect us from collision with the mighty powers beyond the Atlantic? God grant it may. But with our growth as a nation, our interests have proportionately extended. We are threatening to

overshadow the continent. Our relations with the South-American States that are now involved in civil war, may force us to assert the superior right of a progressive civilization to the control of a land upon which nature has heaped every blessing, over the misrule of semi-barbarous governments, which, in the name of liberty, trample upon humanity and law, and employ the superstitions of a degraded church to debase the intellect of the people.

But such a step on our part would arouse the watchful jealousy of foreign powers. If they should deny our right, as the leading government of the continent, to arrange, supervise and control, for the protection of our citizens and the furtherance of our commercial interests, the disordered affairs of our sister republics, war would be the melancholy but inevitable result. Are we prepared for such a struggle? Would the men of '59 breathe the patriotism of '76? Would the spirit of Lexington again animate the citizens? Would our batteries awake the echoes of Chippewa and Lundy's Lane? I pause not for an answer. A patriotism as pure and devoted as that of the Revolution would be exhibited : there would be but one cry, "To

arms;" but one spirit, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*

But the patriotism which would rally the people about the national standard, the spirit which would animate the battle-field, must spring from the consciousness of an honest performance of the manifold duties of citizenship. That alone can nerve the arm to strike right-handed blows for country, home, and altar.

The citizen who performs his duties is entitled to reward. Grecian and Roman antiquity decreed triumphal processions, wreaths and crowns, to him who on the battle-field or in the senate had served his country. The reward of the American citizen is the satisfaction of promoting the great cause of human freedom.

The liberty of the ancient republics was restrictive : ours is as expansive as the universe ; its pulsations beat time to the march of the age, and throb with the heart of humanity. The lands conquered by our arms are blessed with our institutions. The presence of our flag guarantees the privileges of the Constitution. We annex, not alone to impose our civilization, but to confer our liberty. With what pride should the American citizen contemplate the progress of his land ! What nobler reward for duty

performed can he ask, than to feel that the prosperity of this great nation has been entrusted to him, and that he has fulfilled the trust?

Every true citizen has a right so to feel. He has filled his sphere : he has given an example to the timid ; has been a reproach to the corrupt. He has assisted in accomplishing the purposes of another cycle of time, as it rolled on to its eternal judgment. What, in comparison, are crowns and wreaths ? What, to the satisfaction of a great political duty performed, is a triumphal procession with its train of languid slaves, its neighing steeds, its glittering display of beauty, arms, treasure !

If the citizen will look over the vast expanse of the continent, and, seeing everywhere the evidences of a high civilization, will remember that it is the growth of years, not of centuries ; will recal the fact that this wonderful development is due to the application of a single principle, the right and the ability of man to govern himself ; and will learn, from the Constitution under which he lives, that to his care is entrusted that principle, his manhood must be aroused to meet and assist the great necessities of the times.

The crowded marts of commerce, the teeming cities, the plain and hill-side blooming under the skilful hand of man, the white sails dotting every lake and river, the energy that moves in every enterprize, speak to him with an eloquence and poetry so grand, so beautiful, so true, that he must respond in the performance of those acts which will sustain these efforts of the age, and keep in motion that high principle of progress which, on our shores, has found a development to cease only with time. Do we appreciate the position, perform the duties, enjoy the rewards? Do we, possessing the fullest liberty, know what it is to be free? Do we comprehend that the United States has established another fact in history, that republican liberty is compatible with good government? Ask the victim of Austrian persecution, what is liberty: of the martyrs to Napoleon's despotism on the pestilential shores of Cayenne, ask what is liberty: open the dungeons of the Neapolitan monster, and ask the noble souls there lingering in pain, what is liberty; and they will answer you by pointing to America. In our Revolution, they recognized the success of the principle. They sought to achieve it for themselves, in the very

efforts which have consigned them to the dungeon or to exile. Should not we who enjoy the blessing, appreciate it as fully as those who can only sigh for it? Should not their efforts to obtain it, make us all the more jealous of its care?

In the faithful performance of our duties, we discharge an obligation due to humanity. We are entrusted with a principle, whose preservation should be as dear to us as life and honor. When the Fathers announced it, they pledged to its success "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor." That pledge was redeemed; the principle triumphed, and we to-day are living witnesses of their devotion. From this we learn to value our inheritance, and to perform the conditions upon which it is ours. When we forget by what tenure we hold this inheritance, we pronounce our own sentence of deprivation. But can it be that we shall ever forget? Is the victory of the Revolution to be sacrificed? Is the spirit of the Constitution to be thwarted? Are the glorious results of more than eighty years of freedom to be nullified? What say the men of America? Shall it be written in history that the last experiment of freedom failed, because the citizens of the re-

public forgot their duties ? It is not because we are prosperous, not because our growth has no parallel in the experience of centuries, not because our strength is greater than at any other period, that we are to defy the possibility of national ruin. It is for these very reasons that we are to guard more jealously than ever the bulwarks of our strength ; that we are to avoid the false expediences that usurp the place of principle ; that we are to inculcate the elemental truths upon which our government is based, and upon whose preservation depends our perpetuity as a union.

Let us not boast of our strength. It is in the hour of success that the germ of decay is unfolded. It is in the day of prosperity that we should cling most firmly to that truth and virtue which sustained our patriot fathers, and made us free.

Men of America ! Forget not your trust. Liberty, battling everywhere with oppression, looks to you as her standard-bearers. See to it that no stain sullies the stars and stripes. See to it that the glorious emblem of our freedom waves ever from our shores, the signal of rescue and assistance to oppressed humanity. The genius of our institutions, in the name of that

spirit of universal freedom before whose restless presence the shackles of the slave fall off, and the man arises in the dignity of his nature, charges you to think of your privileges and your duties; to remember that Providence permitted you to exist as representatives of those great ideas which will one day vindicate their truth to the nations of the earth; to remember that your duty is to give these ideas that expansion and direction which their importance claims; to remember that liberty is unselfish, confined to no land, but belongs as a God-given right to every man that breathes; to remember, above all else, that, possessing liberty, it is your duty to protect it from the degrading contact with corruption at home, as well as against the attack of enemies from abroad. Make it a bright and burning light, an example to the nations, a reproach to despotism, an incentive to arouse the oppressed to vindicate their humanity.

And when, my countrymen, you have accomplished all this, you can claim, with just pride, descent from those patriot fathers whose lives were spent in stern conflict for great principles, whose deaths were blessed by the sweet consciousness of duty well performed. Then can you claim as your countryman, him whose

name, luminous with the glory of the noblest life which history records, is written in the heart of humanity, as before all others her chosen champion; whose pure and devoted patriotism is the corner-stone of our liberties.

Citizens, on this day renew your vows to your common country. Swear, at her altar, that no defection of yours shall cause her to swerve from the path of right. Swear that the holy flame of patriotism shall burn

“Unquenched through ages,
Like Vesta’s sacred fire.”

Make your standard of political excellence the faithful performance of your duties, and you secure to yourselves and your posterity the enjoyment of a freedom which will be purified and exalted with time.



THE following poem and letter are introduced here as an appropriate accompaniment to the preceding address.

ELEGY.

O friend of other days !

So early fallen in thy manly prime !
In vain alike our grief, our praise —
Another victim of the traitor's crime.

Was it for this ? — the toil of studious years —
That Spartan training for the Forum's strife ;
Was it for this, that first among thy peers,
We saw thee move with splendor into life ?

All had been lost, but that true hearts like thine,
When "shrieked the timid and stood still the brave,"
Strove to arrest the nation's swift decline
To an untimely, an ignoble grave.

* * * * *

I would not look upon thee, dead.

Well memory holds the living form,
That, when our last farewell was said,
Vanished in darkness and in storm.*

O grave ! there comes a princely guest !
Within thy chambers dim and cold,
Where sleep the brave, there give him rest,
With heroes of the Days of Old.

No more I hear that martial tone
Ring boldly out on Freedom's side :
There are, whose words are words alone ;
But thou in Freedom's cause hast died.

O. B. HITCHCOCK, Class of '52.

* At our Class Meeting in '55, the late Col. JACKSON was present by invitation.
We separated at a late hour.

LETTER.

WINDHAM CENTRE, February 21, '62.

PROFESSOR JACKSON :

I THANK you for the kind expressions of your letter in reference to my slight tribute to the memory of the late Col. JACKSON, your son, and my friend in college days.

Except the meeting mentioned in the note to the fourth stanza, I have not seen WILLIAM since leaving college. His presence at our class-meeting was almost a thing of course. He always seemed to belong with us as much as to his own class; for he had many friends, many society and personal associates among us. He was quick to discern character; nor did class or society connections, those barriers to common minds, oppose any obstacle to his search for intellectual fellowship and social intercourse.

On my way to the West, July 3d, '59, I must have passed without seeing WILLIAM. He was to deliver the anniversary oration on the next day in this place. The compact and classical oration was published,* a copy reaching me in the Mississippi valley. Well do I remember that afternoon of mingled reading and reverie out upon the prairie. The identity of the favorite speaker of the Philomathean was preserved in it : that the flower, this the fruit. The rhetoric of the collegian was condensing into the ethics of the statesman.

It would be difficult for me to recall another scholar of aspiring mind, so generous in his estimate of others, so exacting towards himself. His singular beauty of person was in harmony with the structure of his intellect, elegant without effeminacy, graceful yet full of strength. His habits of conversation did not tend to idle talk, but he touched at once some point of philosophy or criticism, working habitually in lines of thought which others traversed only at set times and after special preparation. His fine critical acumen I have had

* It was published in the newspaper issued at Windham Centre. No copy of this discourse was found among the papers of Col. JACKSON; and for its preservation, his friends are indebted to the writer of the above article.

occasion to verify in subsequent studies : the sententious and just synthesis was not easily forgotten. Guarding himself from the allurements of literary embellishment by a patient study of the great masters in history and ethics, it was evident that his eye was upon the future, with wise forecast anticipating the need of discipline and accepting the established conditions of success.

It seems as yesterday that we walked in the garden, discussing the problems of life and history; joined in the debates; read or listened to the appointed essay. It seems but yesterday that he stood in his accustomed place, his eye suffused with inward fire, his voice rich and full of melody, his manner working upon all with a subtle pervading power, and eye and tone, gesture and presence, form and spirit, so wrought and attuned, so moulded and moved, so fashioned and informed with a vivid intelligence, that the mind's ideal was satisfied when WILLIAM JACKSON entered with his whole strength into a contested and prolonged debate.

Yesterday ! a decade has passed ! Duty took from his hand the pen, and replaced it with a sword, saying: Go, serve your country. It is the law of sacrifice. The unblemished is for the altar. Friendship mourns; a light has gone out in your dwelling, that no power shall ever relume; but the great cause for which he died invests with its own sacredness his memory. The light which is piercing our gloom, and which we trust shall fill all our sky, will shed upon the grave of your fallen son its own imperishable glory.

Very respectfully yours,

O. B. HITCHCOCK.

MAY 13 1893.





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